

# DADDY OF KONG

**Paul Stevenson outlines the life and career of Willis O'Brien, creator of King Kong**

**W**ho could have guessed that a twenty-eight year old man, who had spent his life drifting aimlessly from one unsatisfying job to the next, would end up creating a whole new industry within the movie industry itself. An industry that has its present day equivalents in the shape of Dave Allen, Jim Danforth and, of course, Ray Harryhausen.

The young man was Willis O'Brien and the industry was dimensional stop-motion animation. An industry that he would devote the rest of his life to, despite the fact that a great many of his ambitious projects would never see the light of day.

## FAILED ATTEMPTS

Willis Harold O'Brien was born on March 2nd, 1886 in Oakland, California. After several failed attempts at running away from home he finally left at the age of 13, spending the next three years as a cowboy. Later, he became a guide and one of the groups he worked for was a party of scientists looking for fossils. During this time, O'Brien's imagination was fired with the idea of prehistoric life.

O'Brien eventually returned home at the age of seventeen and, several jobs later, found himself working for a San Francisco decorator specializing in marble work. It was in this design shop that he took the first steps down the path that would lead to his career in stop-motion animation.

## PRIZEFIGHTER

While idly sculpting a clay prizefighter and moving it into a number of different stances, O'Brien thought about using this technique to create a kind of three-dimensional cartoon as opposed to the usual series of drawings. With the help of a newsreel cameraman he produced a one-minute film featuring a caveman and a dinosaur which was



shown to Herman Wobber in the summer of 1915. Immediately seeing the potential of the idea, he gave O'Brien five thousand dollars, which he used to create *The Dinosaur* and *the Missing Link*, a more polished product taking two months of O'Brien's time. Wobber eventually found a buyer in the shape of the Edison Company, but during that time O'Brien finished two more shorts, *Morpheus Mike* and *The Birth of a Flivver*.

By 1916, O'Brien was in New York making more films for the Edison Company. These were; *R.F.D. 10,000 BC*, *Prehistoric Poultry*, *Curious Pets of our Ancestors*, *In the Villain's Power* and *Mickey's Naughty Nightmare*. O'Brien left late in 1917 and was contacted early next year by Herbert M. Dawley, a former army major, who gave him three thousand Dollars and three months to make *The Ghost of Slumber Mountain*, based on



O'Brien's own story. The film was his most ambitious project to date and his realistic dinosaurs reflected the extensive research he had done. Despite disagreements with Dawley, and a cut in the running length, the film was very successful, grossing over one hundred thousand Dollars. The deleted footage reappeared in a

follow-up film *Along the Moonbeam Trail*, released the following year after O'Brien and Dawley had gone their separate ways.

### **WILLIS JUNIOR**

In the period between the two films, O'Brien married Hazel Ruth Collette. In 1919, she gave birth to William — the first of their two sons. Willis junior was born the following year.

O'Brien started working for Watter-son R. Rothacker, initially to produce a series of stop-motion novelty films. However, these ideas never materialised as the thoughts of both men turned to more exotic possibilities for the stop-motion process. They finally decided on adapting Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Lost World* to the big screen as a co-production deal with First National Pictures.

### **DINOSAUR MODELS**

O'Brien's technical crew included Ralph Hammeras, who had patented the 'glass shot' process (painting a background on a piece of glass placed between the camera and the actors, a technique still widely in use today), and Marcel Delgado, a nineteen year old Mexican O'Brien had met at the Otis Art Institute. He finally persuaded the young man to work for him and the next two years were spent constructing some fifty dinosaur models.

A monster on the rampage. O'Brien's creation has become a part of Twentieth Century folk-lore.

Fay Wray, the screaming heroine of *King Kong*.

The most sophisticated yet, they comprised a steel skeleton armature with articulated joints and a thin rubber skin, to which detail was applied.

By 1922, a test reel was ready and shown at a meeting of the Society of American Magicians by Conan Doyle himself, who claimed that the film was a manifestation from the ether. This hoax got front page coverage on the *New York Times* until Conan Doyle issued a statement revealing the true source of the film. This publicity came to the attention of Dawley, who planned on taking out a lawsuit and an injunction to stop production on the forthcoming film. He stated that O'Brien had learned the various techniques from him, but notarised statements from O'Brien's former employers at the Edison Film Company proved that O'Brien had been working on stop-motion animation long before he met Dawley, who eventually settled out of court.

### **SMASH HIT**

In 1923, work began on *The Lost World*, finishing fourteen months later. Released in 1925, the film was a smash hit, and on February 4th 1926 it became the first ever in-flight movie, courtesy of the German Air Service Company.

Shortly after completion of the Conan Doyle epic, O'Brien and Hammeras began production work on *Atlantis*, (sometimes incorrectly referred to as a sequel, which it was not.) After several months, Hammeras was transferred to California and the idea fell through, leaving O'Brien in New York. A year later he too left for California, planning to make *Frankenstein* using his stop-motion process. Unfortunately, this idea fell through as well and O'Brien spent some time designing a miniature cityscape for the futuristic musical *Just Imagine*.

### **BANKRUPTCY**

In 1930, RKO bought an outline by O'Brien and Harry Hoyt called *Creation*. The story was in a similar vein to *The Lost World*, featuring many prehistoric creatures. A year was spent in preproduction, during which models were built and extensive storyboards drawn up. Two test reels were shot, but by this time the depression had pushed RKO to the edge of bankruptcy. Merian C. Cooper was brought in to evaluate the films already in production. While Cooper did not think much of the idea behind *Creation*, he was impressed with the technology that had been developed.

O'Brien was aware that Cooper had been trying to sell the idea of making a giant ape movie and, realising the *Creation* would most likely be shelved, he sold Cooper on the idea of using his stop-motion process to create the giant ape. This would save the cost of location work and make it economical-



ly feasible to shoot the film. Authorisation was given to shoot a test reel which featured some scenes and creatures from *Creation* and, of course, Kong himself. (He was made to look more ferocious than O'Brien wanted him to.) The test reel was a big success and filming began on *The Eighth Wonder* — without a script.

O'Brien had little to do with. Interference from Cooper and Schoedsack built up to the point where O'Brien hardly came into the studio. Despite receiving a screen credit, most of the animation was done by Buzz Gibson, one of O'Brien's assistants. Although the film opened very well its popularity soon waned. Due, no doubt, to the

A few days later, O'Brien began work on the new Cooper/Schoedsack film *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Following the success of *Kong*, Cooper had been named head of RKO productions and a delayed honeymoon visit to Italy planted the idea in his mind. O'Brien was hired as effects supervisor and although the film didn't feature any stop-motion work he created many effects, including the eruption of Vesuvius.

## ANTICIPATED

Following this, O'Brien was kept in mind for an anticipated film adaptation of Huxley's *Brave New World*. The project fell through and O'Brien did some work for *The Dancing Pirate*, his first film in Technicolor.

In 1938, O'Brien returned to stop-motion work for a film project called *War Eagles*. A mythical adventure featuring Vikings, prehistoric creatures and numerous battles. Extensive preproduction work was done, including the shooting of a test reel, but the beginning of WW2 brought an end to the idea. (It was during this preproduction phase that O'Brien was visited by a certain Ray Harryhausen, who showed him samples of his work and would continue to do so in years to come.)

It wasn't until 1941 that O'Brien began work on another project, *Gwangi*. This involved a group of cowboys finding miniature horses and a hidden valley inhabited by many different prehistoric reptiles. The cowboys capture an Allosaurus and take it to a circus, whereupon the creature promptly breaks free and wreaks havoc until being forced over a cliff by a truck.

## COLLAPSED

Preproduction began and, again, O'Brien produced many sketches and storyboarded sequences but the project collapsed and would never be heard of until 1967, when Ray Harryhausen made the film utilising many of the storyboards that O'Brien drew.

Some hard times followed as O'Brien tried getting several projects off the ground. They all proved fruitless and he found himself undertaking a number of different jobs out of economic necessity.

Shortly after the war, Cooper and Schoedsack began plans to film *Mr Joseph Young of Africa*, another giant ape movie. O'Brien was hired for the effects work and friction with the producers resulted in many changes in scenes that he had originally planned. Due to the complexity of some of the scenes, O'Brien did not do much of the actual animation. This was left to Ray Harryhausen, who did about eighty per cent of the animation in the finished film. (This was Harryhausen's first film. Showing O'Brien samples of his work over the years had finally convinced him that the young man could handle the effects needed for



The famous denouement of *King Kong*. Kong, on top of the Empire State building, is attacked by aeroplanes.

## REWRITTEN

A first draft screenplay, *The Beast*, was submitted by Edgar Wallace — who died of pneumonia shortly afterwards. Finding it unsuitable, Cooper hired James A. Creelman to rewrite it. This version was subsequently rewritten by Ruth Rose, the wife of Ernest Schoedsack.

Schoedsack was Cooper's partner and the two men started shooting another film *The Most Dangerous Game*, at the same time utilising many of the same sets and actors from *Kong*. Schoedsack would shoot *Game* during the day and the *Kong* unit would take over at night.

*King Kong* premiered on March 24th 1933 at the famous Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. Like *The Lost World* eight years previously, the film was a smash hit and is one of the most famous monster movies of all time — probably the best known piece of O'Brien's work.

## INEVITABLE

Due to the film's resounding success, the inevitable sequel followed, which

fact that the 'son' in *Son of Kong* was a small white gorilla and also that the film was played strictly for laughs.

## BAD TIME

Apart from the disappointment in the finished film, this was also a bad time for O'Brien personally. His relationship with his wife had been very strained for some time and they had parted in 1930. During the filming of *Son of Kong*, his wife contracted cancer and TB. The older of the two sons also contracted TB, but in the eyes, and was blinded as a result. On October the sixth, Hazel O'Brien shot and killed both her sons and turned the gun on herself. The bullet punctured her lung, draining it of the accumulating fluid. Her attempted suicide ironically ended up prolonging her life. O'Brien refused to have anything to do with her and began seeing another woman, Hazel Rutherford. Just before the New Year she was told that she had breast cancer and, rather than submit to disfiguring surgery, she killed herself. Several months later, O'Brien began seeing Darlyne Prenett, whom he would subsequently marry on November 17th 1934, a matter of days after Hazel O'Brien finally died.



the film.) The film — now called *Mighty Joe Young* — was released in 1949. Plans for a sequel, *Joe Meets Tarzan*, were scrapped when the film was slow to recoup its budget.

## CLIMAX

Shortly after this, O'Brien tried selling a script that he had written with his wife. *Valley of the Mist* another 'lost world' opus, featuring a Mexican boy and his pet bull. The film was to climax with the bull battling an Allosaurus. Producer Jesse Lasky and his son William made preparations for the film but were unable to secure the necessary financing. In April 1950, the option was sold to Edward and William Nassour who promptly hired Paul Rader to rewrite the script, now called *Ring Around Saturn*. Despite this, the project soon fell by the wayside.

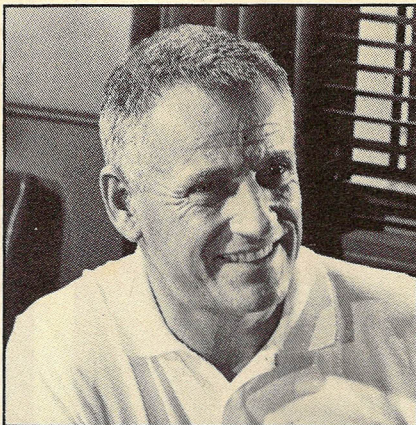
While working for Nassour, O'Brien was contacted by Cooper who was toying with the idea of filming the H.G. Wells novel *The Food of the Gods*. The giant animals would be done by stop-motion, but again the film was shelved, this time due to scripting difficulties.

In 1952, O'Brien was again working for Cooper on another project, a documentary showcase, *This Is Cinerama*, a widescreen process that created a three dimensional effect without the need for glasses. Although O'Brien had little to do with the film, Cooper's main reason for hiring him was to investigate the possibility of remaking *King Kong* in cinerama. The untimely death of the technician behind the process put an end to that idea.

## UNSUCCESSFULLY

O'Brien then tried — unsuccessfully — to launch several other projects; two ideas for television and other ideas for

an amusement park. It wasn't until 1955 that O'Brien managed to sell another idea to the Nassour brothers. Called *The Beast of Hollow Mountain*, the film was another variation on the 'lost world' theme, also including elements from *Gwangi*. (Cattlemen look for the source of their cattle deaths and find it in the shape of a giant lizard that they manage to capture. Naturally, it breaks free and goes on the rampage until it is finally killed.) The script was rewritten and, despite assurances that he would do the animation, he found himself barred from the studio lot and the film was made without him.



Stanley Kramer; he worked with O'Brien on his last film, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*.

## ESTABLISHED

In 1956, O'Brien was hired by Irwin Allen to work on *The Animal World*, a wildlife documentary that would feature a prehistoric sequence. Although O'Brien designed the effects, the actual animation was carried out by Ray Harryhausen who had, by now, established himself as a head technician. The animated sequences

were widely regarded as the only high point in the entire film.

The next two years would see O'Brien working on a couple of low-budget films. First *The Black Scorpion*, yet another variation on the 'lost world' theme. The budget resulted in the film being shot in Mexico, where the living and working conditions were so bad that the animation work had to be completed in the home of one of O'Brien's friends. Despite the low budget, the effects work quite well which is more than can be said for his next feature, *The Giant Behemoth*. Money was so short on this film that O'Brien was unable to finish the effects. A compromise was made by using one scene several times in order to fill in the gaps.

## BAD LUCK

Despite the bad luck he'd had in the past, O'Brien never gave up trying to sell ideas to the studios. Among them were; *Triple Assignment* (a film made up of three interrelated segments), *The Eagle*, *Umbah* and *Matilda*. He also sold four ideas to the Nassour brothers, (before he was so badly treated on *The Beast of Hollow Mountain*.) They were; *Last of the Labyrinthons*, *Below the Bottom*, *The Vines of Ceres* and *The Devil's Slide*. Other projects, included the elaborately prepared *The Land of Oso Si-Papu* and *Baboon*.

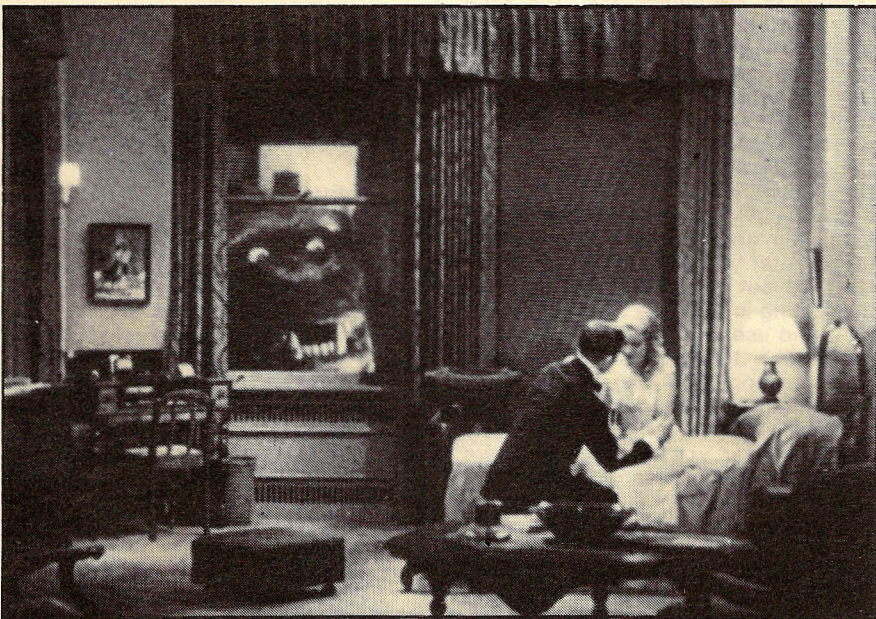
In 1960, he was again hired by Irwin Allen who was planning a remake of *The Lost World*, a project O'Brien was looking forward to very much. His enjoyment was short-lived when Allen decided on using dressed-up iguanas and alligators for prehistoric reptiles. His objections were ignored and the finished film was a great source of disappointment to him.

## INTEREST

Despite all the years of bad treatment at the hands of the film industry, O'Brien never gave up trying to launch other projects. Hoping to remake his most famous creation in colour, he wrote *King Kong vs Frankenstein* and tried to interest RKO president Daniel T. O'Shea in the idea. O'Shea introduced him to producer John Beck who hired a writer to rewrite it and the story became *King Kong vs Prometheus*. Beck tried selling the idea in the US, Italy, and finally Japan, where it was made as *King Kong vs Godzilla*.

O'Brien received the bad news about his film during preproduction work on *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. On this film he again found many of his ideas and suggestions ignored. Most of the animation work (the fire truck and ladder sequence) was done by Jim Danforth. It was while working on this film that O'Brien did not feel too well and went home. Later, on that same day, he collapsed with a heart attack.

Willis O'Brien died on November eighth 1962, at the age of 76. ■



Guess who's coming to dinner. One of the trickier model shots in *King Kong*.